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New Jersey

Military duty begins with a tour

Teens meet recruiters from service academies

Monday, August 11, 2003

BY WAYNE WOOLLEY
Star-Ledger Staff

As the war in Iraq unfolded, 17-year-old Melissa Coats watched the television coverage with an odd feeling of destiny.

The high school senior from West Deptford kept picturing herself in the middle of the action and imagining what it might feel like to go to war as a Navy officer.

"I just kept having this feeling of that's where I should be," Coats said. "I know that going to the Naval Academy is the way to get there."

For Coats and roughly 300 other high school seniors from around New Jersey, the first step on the long road to admission to one of the nation's military academies began yesterday during a daylong presentation at the Naval Air Warfare Center, Division Lakehurst.

For the first time, the bulk of the students who expressed an interest in joining the Class of 2008 at the Naval Academy or the United States Military Academy at West Point were invited as a group to meet with representatives from the academies.

In addition to recruiters from Annapolis and West Point, perspective students met representatives from the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo., as well as the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in New London, Conn., and the Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, N.Y.

U.S. Sen. Jon Corzine (D-N.J.) organized the event because he said his office has been overwhelmed with requests for more information about the appointment process to the academies. Admission requires an appointment by a member of Congress. Last year, about 50 New Jerseyans won appointments to the service academies.



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"This is as important as anything I do," said Corzine, a former Marine. "In a way, these appointments are like federal judgeships. The people we appoint will be running the armed forces long after we leave office."

After a decline in interest in the military academies throughout the 1980s and 1990s, applications are up sharply over the past two years.

The Naval Academy received 12,500 applications last year -- an increase of more than 3,000 from the year before. Applications to West Point jumped nearly 20 percent over the same period.

Academy representatives largely attribute the renewed interest to a combination of post-9/11 patriotism and a military profile boosted by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

But they concede that a lousy economy and the promise of a free education at a prestigious school don't hurt.

Lt. Col. John Marlin, an Air Force reservist from Hellertown, Pa., who interviews perspective candidates for the Air Force Academy says free tuition appeals more to parents than perspective students.

"If the first word out of a (candidate's) mouth is free education, that's the wrong answer," he said. "With most of these kids, they want to do it because they want to fly. It's just the best opportunity out there for it."

Dreams of flight play heavily into 17-year-old Hillary Lutz's plans to go to the Naval or Air Force academy.

"I want to fly and I want a challenge," said Lutz, who is near the top of her class at Ocean City High School.

That Lutz can picture herself in uniform some day was a bit of a shock to her mother, Nelsa Lutz.

"When she first told me what she wanted to do, all I could think about was war and all the negative things that go with that," Nelsa Lutz said. "But she's putting her heart and soul into getting into one of these schools. How could I be against it?"

Lynn Garlasco had the same fears when she realized her son, John, was serious about going to West Point or the Naval Academy.

"I finally just decided that I want him to be happy," the Paramus woman said. "I'm proud that he's aiming so high. Doing something like this is the best you can do."

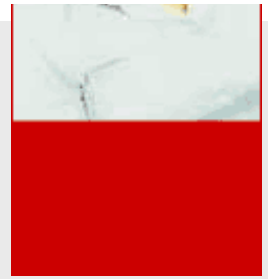
For Carla Coats, the mother of the West Deptford girl who wants to attend the Naval Academy, talking her daughter out of a military career was never an option.

"This has been in her heart since she was very young," Coats said.

Wayne Woolley covers the military. He can be reached at wwoolley@starledger.com or (973) 392-1559.

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